

WASHINGTON, D.C. Although he called it “better than nothing,” U.S. Representative Sanford Bishop said a “concurrent receipt” provision passed by the House Friday (7/11) fails to provide a fair deal for most of the 560,000 disabled military retirees who are currently denied disability benefits.

“Nothing justifies a denial of benefits to any veteran who has earned them through service and sacrifice, and Congress should correct this wrong right now,” the Second District Congressman told his U.S. House colleagues.

The House passed a Defense Authorization Bill on Friday that provides “concurrent receipt,” meaning payment of both retirement and disability compensation, to approximately one third of the country’s military retirees with 20 years or more of service who have suffered service-connected disabilities. Starting on January, it would provide “concurrent receipt” to those who have combat-related disabilities or received a Purple Heart. Over a 10-year period, it would phase in “concurrent receipt” for other retirees with 50 percent or more disabilities.

An amendment supported by Representative Bishop to give the House a chance to consider full implementation of “concurrent receipt” to all retirees with service-connected disabilities was defeated by a vote of 217-188. While calling the provision that passed “better than nothing,” he said the fight would continue for full implementation.

The Congressman is a cosponsor of the “Retired Pay Restoration Act,” a bill mandating of retirement and disability compensation to all eligible veterans. Under the existing law, disabled military retirees must deduct any disability compensation from their retirement earnings. As a result, many disabled veterans are, in effect, denied disability compensation.

The Georgia lawmaker is one of 203 House members who has signed a “discharge petition” to legally force the “concurrent receipt” bill out of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, where it has been bottled up since its’ introduction last February. It takes 218 signatures to force a bill out of a House committee. The Senate has passed its version of the measure. “Concurrent receipt” bills have been introduced in every Congress since 1987, but have always bogged down.

“Retirement income and disability compensation are two separate things, and it makes no sense for the federal government to tell veterans: ‘we’ll give you one, but not both even though you earned both,’” Representative Bishop said Friday. “That strikes me as nothing more than a legal rip-off.”

He said the consequences of this unjust federal practice are severe on many veterans. According to a study by the House Government Reform Committee, the denial of benefits costs the average retired disabled veteran \$4,615 a year, he pointed out. He said the overall cost to the government would be several hundred million dollars, but added there were fiscally responsible ways to provide the necessary revenue.

Representative Bishop said he supports tax cuts for working Americans. But, he noted, funding for critical needs such as “concurrent receipt” would be available if Congress would trim back

this year's tax cut just for Americans who earn more than \$1 million a year, who are due an average cut of \$88,326. However, a majority in Congress rejected this solution.

"Until we act, this Congress cannot say it is keeping the promise to America's veterans," the Congressman said.

Earlier in the week, Representative Bishop rose on the House floor and made the following statement in connection with the nation's upcoming observance of Veterans Day:

"MR. SPEAKER: When the nation observes Veterans Day, our collective purpose is to thank the men and women who have faithfully worn the uniform of the country's armed services for the service and sacrifice that has kept us strong and free.

"But I think we should thank veterans for something else, as well.

"In addition to their service in the military, we should also express the nation's gratitude for the unshakeable foundation of patriotic citizenship that veterans have always provided in civilian life-and that the country cannot do without, especially during times of peril such as these.

"Veterans never stop fighting for a free and secure country.

"They have fought for a strong defense and strong foreign policy. They have fought for integrity and responsibility in government. They have fought to protect the U.S. flag and all it represents, including the respect we owe to those who have paid the price for freedom. They have fought for the benefits veterans have earned and deserve, including disability benefits for those who have suffered permanent injuries in military service. They have fought for the American ideal of freedom and justice for all.

Those of us who serve in Congress should thank veterans not only by making speeches, but also by rolling up our sleeves and addressing the critical unmet needs of our veterans' population.

"We need to act on long-pending 'concurrent receipt' legislation so that we no longer deny disability payments to military retirees. Nothing justifies the denial of these benefits to any veteran who has earned them through service and sacrifice, and Congress should correct this wrong right now.

"We need to improve the veterans' health care system so that we no longer have a backlog of more than 100,000 veterans who are waiting six months or more to receive the care they need. Some veterans are waiting up to a year or more. This means many are getting sicker while they wait, and I fear some are not making it. This is intolerable.

"We need the most cost-effective system possible, and I have no quarrel with the concept of the Veterans' Administration's Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services program. But we need to make sure that any reorganization does not end up downsizing or eliminating facilities that veterans need, thereby reducing access even more.

“We need a VA budget that meets the needs-not one that falls below the new fiscal year’s authorization by \$1.8 billion and barely keeps pace with inflation. I believe we need to cut taxes to stimulate the economy and provide relief to middle and lower income working Americans, but we do not need to provide an average tax cut of \$88,326 to Americans earning more than \$1 million a year when we could trim that amount by just a few thousand dollars and save enough revenue to take care of some of our critical national needs.

“We need to fulfill the country’s promise to our fellow Americans who have devoted a substantial part of their lives in defense of the country, many putting their lives on the line.

“We live in difficult and dangerous times. But we should be confident about the country’s ability to meet the grave challenges we face. As long as we have people in our country who stand ready to make whatever effort and sacrifice is necessary, we should be confident that our nation has what it takes to defeat the forces that would do us harm and that we will succeed in advancing the cause of freedom for our generation and for generations to come.

“As our veterans demonstrate every day, patriotism is alive and well.

“And that should give us all hope for the future.

“As we celebrate Veterans Day, 2003, let us say to all of the nation’s 25.1 million veterans: “we thank you, we support you, we need you, and may God bless you for keeping the country free and strong.”